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Robert Bertram Serjeant 1915–1993

BOB SERJEANT was born in Edinburgh on 23 March 1915. Apart from a short period of time spent in Masham, Yorkshire, his childhood and university education were spent in Edinburgh (a deeply incised inscription, bearing only his name and a 1935 date, on a desk in the Muir Institute remains to this day to prove it!). At university he read Semitic languages (Arabic and Hebrew). Studying the former, he came into close contact with Richard Bell, primarily a Quran scholar, who stressed early on to his young and promising protégé the value of meticulousness and accuracy in his work. He took a first class MA and visited Syria—his first time in the Middle East—in 1935 and, armed with a scholarship, he left his native Scotland for Trinity College, Cambridge, where he began research under Professor C. A. Storey. He was awarded his Ph.D. degree in 1939 with a thesis entitled 'Materials for a history of Islamic textiles up to the Mongol conquest' and during the years 1942–8 the work was published as a series of articles in *Ars Islamica*.[1] There were two permanent consequences of his research experience in Cambridge at this time: Storey continued and intensified the uncompromising insistence on meticulous precision in all academic work which Bell had begun during Serjeant's undergraduate days in Edinburgh; here too began a life-long interest in textiles

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[1] 9 (1942), 54–92; 10 (1943), 71–104; 11 (1946), 98–135; 13–14 (1948), 75–117. It was published in monograph form in Beirut 1972 under the title *Islamic Textiles*.

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which was to play such a major part in his later research, particularly that on medieval trade.

In 1940 he won a scholarship at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London to undertake dialect studies in southern Arabia. During this period, however, with the Italians beginning to threaten British Arabian possessions from Ethiopia, a country they had recently overrun together with British Somaliland just the other side of the Red Sea, Serjeant was commissioned into the Aden Government Guards. For about a year he trekked over vast areas of south Arabia, mainly in Subaihi country to the west of Aden,[2] accompanied quite literally by a camel, a wireless set and a group of tribal guards as his only companions. Not surprisingly, the interlude in the Government Guards had a lasting impression on the twenty-five-year-old Arabist. Serjeant found that he had just as much affinity with his tribal Arab soldiers as he certainly had with British colonial administrators; at this time too he learned to speak Arabic as none of his contemporary academic Arabists had been able. By the time he returned to SOAS in 1941 to a lectureship, he spoke fluent Arabic, knew he felt entirely at home with Arabs and, one can guess, was reasonably clear where his future area of scholarly endeavour lay.

In 1941, Serjeant married an Edinburgh-trained medical doctor, Marion Keith Robertson, who, sometimes with him, sometimes on her own, rendered pioneering medical help in Hadramawt. Often in the most primitive conditions, she plied her trade, much in demand in particular in gynaecological cases and for sewing up the results of inter-tribal skirmishes!

Serjeant's academic career came to a temporary halt soon after his appointment when he was summoned to the BBC and appointed editor of the *Arabic Listener, al-Mustamiʿ*. Firstly in Evesham, later in North London, Serjeant was to spend two years working at his important wartime task.[3]

After the War he returned to SOAS and in 1947 was awarded a Colonial Research Fellowship which enabled him to carry out a year's fieldwork in Wadi Hadramawt, an area neglected by academic Arabists and well known only to scholar-administrators like Harold Ingrams.

[2] See R. B. Serjeant, 'Notes on Subaihi territory, West of Aden', *Le Muséon* 66 (1953), 123–31.

[3] See Peter Partner, *Arab Voices — the BBC Arabic Services 1938–88* (London, 1988). Plate vii shows the youthful Serjeant in conference with his colleagues in the BBC.

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Serjeant used this short time intelligently, concentrating in the main on manuscript sources and laying the scholarly foundations in such areas as the language, history, folklore and customary law of the area. Only Serjeant had the linguistic competence for such work and the local traditional scholars delighted in the company of one so knowledgeable of their culture. As for publications, the Hadrami interlude produced, *inter alia*, the article in two parts of immense pioneering importance, 'Materials of South Arabian history. Notes on new MSS from Ḥaḍramawt', *BSOAS* 13 (1950), 281–307, 581–601, and the monograph, *Prose and Poetry from Ḥaḍramawt* (London, 1951), which is mentioned in more detail below.

Serjeant was made reader in 1948 and in 1955 was appointed to a chair at SOAS with the title of Professor of Modern Arabic, '. . . a misleading and to him rather irritating designation, for he was not primarily interested in modern Arabic literature (the word modern was subsequently discarded)'.[4] His inaugural lecture delivered on 5 June 1956 proved to be another piece of research of great importance in south Arabian social history, *The Saiyids of Ḥaḍramawt*, published by the School in 1957.

Not always happy at the School, Serjeant seized the opportunity to return to Cambridge, when in 1964 he was invited by his friend, Professor A. J. Arberry, the then Sir Thomas Adams's Professor of Arabic, to fill a lectureship in Islamic History and to direct the new and struggling Middle East Centre. Serjeant himself would give little away concerning his SOAS years. Certainly there were personal differences within the School; certainly there was a dearth of opportunity for more travel which he felt he ought to carry out while he was relatively young. Ironically, his move to Cambridge followed on immediately after a year's sabbatical spent in Bahrain and South Arabia, much of it in the Wahidi Sultanate, where I myself was Assistant Advisor in the Aden Protectorate administration and where I could observe with growing amazement and admiration how Serjeant dealt with his informants. With consummate ease and unfailing stamina, he firstly tested and probed and then, when he was sure that his informant had passed the test, gently extracted the information which *he* wanted, not the information which the informant thought Serjeant wanted.

From Aden after careful preparations, he moved through Baihan northwards behind Royalist lines into the Yemen. The country had

[4] Charles Beckingham, 'Robert Serjeant' (obituary), *The Guardian*, 19 May 1993.

become the Yemen Arab Republic in 1962 after the death of Imam Aḥmad and the revolt of the military and in 1964 was still propped up by some 80,000 Egyptian troops despatched to the Yemen by Gamal Abd al-Nasser and still facing stiff Royalist opposition. For several months, travelling mainly by mule or on foot, Serjeant lived with the Royalist troops in their mountain caves, the only accommodation safe from Egyptian MIG bombing. During all this time, he tirelessly interviewed Ḥamīd al-Dīn princes and tribal irregulars alike, anyone able to throw light on the momentous events of the revolution and the resulting civil war. His papers based on these interviews and those based on similar interviews with South Arabian leaders and politicians concerning the 'British betrayal' and the last days of Aden remained, alas, unpublished at Serjeant's death. They are of a highly sensitive nature and should now remain sealed for an appropriate period before they can be dealt with by a scholar of sufficient competence and tact to make them available to the scholarly world.

On his return from the Yemen in the autumn of 1964, Serjeant was delighted to move to Cambridge. The considerable cut in salary, from professor to lecturer, was of little consequence now that he was back there. The University had inexplicably not been included on the list of UGC Middle East centres which followed the Sir William Hayter report on oriental studies in 1962 (the centres were designated as Durham, London and Oxford). Arberry had decided that Cambridge would have its Middle East Centre, but this could only be a self-financing centre and when Serjeant arrived in Cambridge in 1964 it comprised a small room, occupied by both the director and his secretary, in Pembroke College, and a few shelves of books in a small house in Botolph Lane, off Trumpington Street. He was appointed to a readership in Cambridge in 1966 and in 1970, after Arberry's death in late 1969, Serjeant was the obvious candidate for the Sir Thomas Adams's Chair of Arabic. He was duly elected and remained in the chair until his retirement in 1981. This retirement came early by two terms and Serjeant was by this time relieved to depart. He had for some time been frustrated in some of his own efforts to achieve what he thought was in the best interests of Arabic in the Faculty of Oriental Studies and he could not go along with certain proposed changes which were in the air.

Apart from his university teaching and research supervision, and of course the continuing output of his own scholarly works, Serjeant worked tirelessly to transform the Middle East Centre into a going concern. The late Dr Robin Bidwell, a scholar of no mean repute in

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the field of modern Middle Eastern history and an old friend of Serjeant, was recruited as secretary/librarian. Between the two the library, primarily made up of modern works to bring Cambridge Arabic studies into the twentieth century, grew from strength to strength and now fills the well in the library of the Faculty in Sidgwick Avenue. Other developments took place: a thriving series of lectures and seminars came into being, much appreciated by the research students and staff of the Faculty, but also by outsiders too. In 1974 the first volume of *Arabian Studies* was published by C. Hurst and Company for the MEC, edited jointly by Serjeant and Bidwell. The eight volumes of *Arabian Studies*, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1978, 1979, 1982 (Scorpion Communications), 1985 (Scorpion) and 1990 (CUP) and the two volumes of its successor, *New Arabian Studies*, 1993 (University of Exeter Press) and 1994 (Exeter) provide a unique vehicle for studies concerning the Arabian Peninsula in all scholarly fields with the exception of pure science and contemporary politics. They have proved a great success and have received much acclaim, their success, and indeed their uniqueness, stemming from the combination in each volume of scholarly contributions of the highest academic standards with those written by knowledgeable amateurs, the latter, it should be said, often published after much editorial hard work on Serjeant's part. All this MEC enterprise needed money and Serjeant's tremendous reputation in the Arab world meant that he could try without embarrassment to raise money in the rich states there.

Serjeant's other major publication achievement during his period as Sir Thomas Adams's Professor was *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*. The idea for such a history had been conceived by Arberry in the 1960s and had always had Serjeant's enthusiastic support. It was to have been edited by the two and appear in five volumes, the first four chronological and a fifth devoted to translations from the Arabic into English — an activity close to Arberry's heart. After Arberry's death in 1969 and Serjeant's election to the chair in 1970, the latter invited two old friends to join him in the project: the late A. F. L. Beeston, Laudian Professor of Arabic in Oxford, and the late T. M. Johnstone, Professor of Arabic in London. I, a young assistant lecturer in Cambridge, was flattered to be asked to join such a distinguished team as editorial secretary and accepted with alacrity. The first decision taken by the new editors was to drop the fifth, translation, volume. Volume I was to include the history of Arabic literature up to the end of the Umayyad period (AD 750); II was to be divided into two and cover the

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Abbasid period, the 'Golden Age' (AD 750–ca. 1258): belles-lettres and the non-belles-lettres literature; III was to have been a post-Abbasid, pre-modern volume (ca. AD 1258–18th century) and IV the modern period (19th and 20th centuries). The editorial work involved was for all frustrating and time-consuming. Every conceivable problem arose among the numerous contributors and the considerable pressures to conform to precise deadlines on the part of CUP, however justifiable from a purely commercial point of view, came to be somewhat resented by the editors. It also seemed difficult to convey to several CUP staff with responsibility for the work over the years that the traditional Cambridge History format and house rules were not necessarily always the best for what the editors had in mind in this particular work. Despite all the problems and frustrations, Serjeant, the enormously heavy burden of all his other academic activities notwithstanding, saw three volumes into print, all under the general title of *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: Arabic Literature to the end of the Umayyad period*, 1983, with a huge Serjeant contribution on 'Early Arabic prose', pp. 114–53; *'Abbasid Belles-Lettres*, 1990, with a joint contribution written by him and his friend, the Yemeni statesman-scholar, Sayyid Ahmad el-Shami, 'Regional literature: the Yemen', pp. 442–68 and *Religion, learning and science in the 'Abbasid period*, 1990.

On his retirement in 1981, he and his wife decided to return to live in Scotland and they bought a cottage in the hamlet of Denhead near St Andrews in Fife. Here Serjeant, though disappointed that he could not be welcomed in the Department of Arabic Studies in the University of St Andrews by all its members, soon re-established contact with his Alma Mater and was warmly received in the Muir Institute in Edinburgh. In 1985 he was awarded the degree of D.Litt. (*honoris causa*) by the University of Edinburgh and in 1986 he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy. He and his wife could pursue in their retirement cottage their fondness for gardening and keeping cats. Serjeant continued to work to the very end and died suddenly on 29 April 1993 as he pottered in the garden during a rest from work at his desk. He is survived by his wife, a son, a daughter and a granddaughter.

The present writer knew Bob Serjeant over a period of thirty-five years in his capacity as undergraduate teacher at SOAS, postgraduate supervisor, senior colleague in Cambridge and close academic colleague until his death. To those undergraduates who did not know and appreciate the real Serjeant, he appeared a somewhat remote and intimidating, certainly a demanding, teacher. He demanded of his

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own undergraduates what his teachers had demanded of him; good scholarly habits are not introduced gradually, but are insisted upon from the very beginning. For those undergraduates who paused to think, they were receiving the best possible training in the reading and interpretation of classical Arabic texts. For many years at SOAS, he taught *Kitāb al-Bukhalā'* by the famous ninth-century Iraqi bellettrist, al-Jāḥiẓ. When I arrived in Cambridge from Aden in 1965 to begin my Ph.D. research under Serjeant's supervision, he suggested I join his Part II Tripos text classes where he was reading al-Mubarrad's *al-Kāmil fī al-lughah* and Ibn Khaldūn's *Muqaddimah*. The regime was the same as that I recalled from my undergraduate days at SOAS: a rigorous training in the reading and interpretation of difficult medieval texts. I for one always had good cause to be grateful.

Concerning his roles as postgraduate supervisor and senior colleague, I can do no better than to quote from a previous obituary.

> As a doctoral supervisor, he was at his best. He never pushed or hurried, but he expected results and his eagle eye never missed a point when written work was presented. He criticised, encouraged (though never praised), suggested, recommended. He drew selflessly on his own wealth of knowledge and resources to steer the postgraduate student along the right path. Similarly as senior academic, he carefully, though almost imperceptibly, guided the young, newly appointed charge under him, advising on academic and other matters with particular warmth and generosity.[5]

More can perhaps be said here of Serjeant's editorial work, which has so far been mentioned only briefly in the context of *Arabian Studies/New Arabian Studies* and *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*. Not for him the easy way out, if a contribution did not in some way come up to standard. Rather than return the manuscript to the author, he invariably worked on it himself, spending long hours checking and correcting, if necessary even re-writing. Again for him meticulousness was everything and, although he was often accused in jest by his fellow editor of *A S* of being 'a Scottish pedant', he insisted on every dot and dash being in place. Inferior presentation meant an inferior piece of research — and that was that!

Serjeant's own publications are so numerous and diverse that it is an impossible task to do him justice in any assessment of them. What follows may well be considered over-subjective; I can only plead that I

[5] My obituary, 'Robert Bertram Serjeant. 23 March 1915–29 April 1993', *The British-Yemeni Society Journal* 1 (November 1993), 11.

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am not competent to assess his work in all the areas in which he was interested.[6] They include monographs, articles, contributions and reviews.

It is interesting to note that Serjeant's first monograph was a small, now rather rare, manuscript catalogue of only 16 pages entitled *A Handlist of the Arabic, Persian and Hindustani MSS. of New College, Edinburgh*, published by Luzac in 1942. All apart from the two-page preface is in typescript (typed by Serjeant himself?) and those incipits cited are written in his own very distinctive Arabic hand. The preface is dated 1940 and the work must have been completed before Serjeant left for Aden that year. Of his other, weightier books, it is my intention to mention only three which in my estimation represent his most important contributions to scholarship. Serjeant's year in Hadramawt following the award of a Colonial Research Fellowship in 1947 has been noted above. The results of much of this fieldwork were published in a monograph entitled rather mysteriously *South Arabian Poetry I. Prose and Poetry from Ḥaḍramawt*. Edited, collated and corrected with an introductory preface by R. B. Serjeant (London, 1951). Although the book does concentrate heavily on the colloquial (*Ḥumaynī*) poetry of Hadramawt, as the main title indicates, it does also include the interesting *maqāmah* literature. The subtitle is therefore more appropriate. Also it is not entirely clear why the Roman numeral is included, as if this were the first volume of a multi-volume work. Perhaps it was intended to publish the bibliography to which Serjeant refers on page ix of his introduction as a separate volume two. The book achieves three aims: firstly it provides immaculately edited original texts of literary works previously unknown in the world of scholarship; the 86-page introduction gives us a comprehensive background study of the literature; it is replete also with observations of, and comments on, Hadrami society. The book is much enhanced by the beautiful calligraphy employed for the reproduction of the texts.

In 1963 the Clarendon Press in Oxford published Serjeant's *The*

[6] A comprehensive bibliography of all Serjeant's publications up to the year 1983 can be found in J. D. Pearson, 'Published works of Robert Bertram Serjeant', in R. L. Bidwell & G. R. Smith (eds.), *Arabian and Islamic Studies. Articles presented to R. B. Serjeant on the occasion of his retirement from the Sir Thomas Adams's Chair of Arabic at the University of Cambridge* (London & New York, 1983), 268–78. His publications between the years 1983–93 and those which appear posthumously will be listed in the special issue of *New Arabian Studies* 3 (1995), the articles of which have been commissioned to produce a memorial volume.

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Portuguese off the South Arabian Coast. Hadrami Chronicles. With Yemeni and European accounts of Dutch pirates off Mocha in the seventeenth century. The actual Hadrami texts, invaluable as they undoubtedly are in translation, in fact occupy pp. 41–113 of a book 233 pages in length. The introduction remains to this day a basic source for a number of aspects of the medieval, political, social and economic history of the Red Sea, Indian Ocean and South-West Arabia. The Hadrami historical texts themselves are very precisely rendered with copious annotations and allow us to see the strength of feeling of the South Arabians when faced with this new infidel threat from Europe. Serjeant made no pretence of knowing the corresponding Portuguese sources in their originals and he wisely engaged the assistance of a longstanding friend, Professor C. F. Beckingham, who adds much scholarly information and comment which enable one to view the scene also from the Portuguese side. No fewer than seven appendices follow, all constantly relevant for one working in the medieval history of this area: a Turkish gun from Aden, Arabic terms for shipping (this appendix and the later Glossary make this a major source of Arabic nautical lexicography, a subject which is so poorly represented in the classical lexica), money and coinage in the tenth/sixteenth century and later (a pioneering numismatic essay), the history and legend of the Mahrah, Socotra, the Mamluk fortifications at Jeddah and finally some Portuguese inscriptions from the Merani Fort in Muscat. Proof of the scholarly value of the book has been the constant and frequent mention of it in academic writings since its publication and still to this day, thirty years after its composition.

Planning for *Ṣanʿā', an Arabian Islamic City*, published by Scorpion for the World of Islam Festival Trust in London in 1983, began more than ten years prior to that date at a memorable meeting in the Faculty of Oriental Studies in Cambridge to which Serjeant invited some half dozen scholars with an interest in the Yemen. To those gathered around he explained his plan for a volume (perhaps more than one was envisaged at this stage) which would deal exhaustively with Ṣanʿā', the chief town of the Yemen, its history, its culture, its development, its architecture, its economic and social organisation, even the dress of its people and their cuisine. Numerous further meetings followed and under Serjeant's direction a research team, Yemeni and European scholars in collaboration, was established. Money was raised and field-work for those who needed it was carried out in the first half of the 1970s. The fruit of all this labour was the massive tome of over 600

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two-column pages which is now commonly known simply as 'the Ṣanʿāʾ book'. Serjeant's role in the production of the Ṣanʿāʾ book is impossible to exaggerate. His fellow editor, Professor Ronald Lewcock, is an architect and architectural historian, so naturally to Serjeant fell the lion's share of the editing of the majority, non-architectural chapters and the mammoth task of ensuring consistency throughout the book and coping with a thousand and one common editorial chores. Of the twenty-seven chapters, Serjeant's name figures in the list of contents in no fewer than nineteen, six authored by him alone. In tandem with his work on the book, Serjeant became heavily involved in the World of Islam exhibition at the Museum of Mankind. There, many will recall, one could stroll around the streets and alleys of Ṣanʿāʾ and even smell its market smells. It was a superb success. The Ṣanʿāʾ book, which has received widespread acclaim, is Serjeant's book and it is without doubt the finest memorial to his life and scholarship.

Beginning in 1942, Serjeant maintained a steady flow of scholarly articles and contributions which in the main appeared in the *BSOAS*, the *JRAS* and, early in his career, *Le Muséon*. After the establishment of *Arabian Studies* in 1974, he naturally included many of his articles in the journal which he himself edited. Some of these articles and contributions have already found their way into two Variorum volumes.[7] A third volume has now been edited and prepared for publication in 1995. This leaves just sufficient material from Serjeant's other short publications to make up a fourth and it is hoped that this will come to fruition as soon as publication can be arranged. The majority of these articles concern the Arabian Peninsula, in particular the South. A golden thread which runs through most is the subject of customary law and practice. In this field Serjeant perhaps produced his best articles. In his long and frequent travels, he constantly sought out informants and filled page after page of field notes which were all, after his return to his library, compared as far as possible with the vast array of Arabic texts available to him. The process was of course a two-way one: what he read in his texts which was of interest to him he made every possible effort to check in the field. Such articles, with such a sound philological base and such heavy emphasis on the exact interpretation of sources, be they oral or literary, were often a disappointment to those trained in the modern methodology of sociology and anthropology. In her recent review[8] of

[7] *Studies in Arabian History and Civilisation*, Variorum Reprints (London, 1981) and *Customary and Shari'ah Law In Arabian Society*, Variorum (Aldershot, 1991).
[8] See *JSS* 39/1 (1994), 141.

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Serjeant's second Variorum volume, *Customary and Shari'ah Law in Arabian Society* (1991), Martha Mundy lashes out:

> But for those without a specialist interest in South Arabia, the social analysis offered in these essays will generally prove discouraging. This is a philologian's interpretation of society: it is enough to name something for the reader to understand it, to recount the statement of one learned native almost without commentary, or to annotate a document without sketching the social field from which it derives . . . The author's sociology is more akin to that of Admiralty or District handbooks, untainted by the methods of twentieth-century social history or anthropology.

There is more, and she sadly misses several points, the most important of which is that of course Serjeant did not write using 'the methods of twentieth-century social history or anthropology'; he was not trained to do so. Nor does one ever encounter a social scientist with Serjeant's philological and interpretative skills. Surely his work on such subjects as society and customary law can now be built on by those who have the competence and who wish to sketch 'the social field from which it derives'.

Another extremely important aspect of Serjeant's research which resulted in article publications was his profound interest in the early history of Islam and the origins of the Shīʿah. His examination of the precise meanings and implications of words connected with religious usages, like, for example, *ḥaram, ḥawṭah, hijrah* etc., and the status of holy families convinced him that the origins and early development of Islam should always be studied in an Arabian context. Such a strong feeling inevitably led him to a violent hostility to those who tended to see Islam as no more than a Judaic heresy. What his research revealed about the status of holy families has important implications for the early history of the Shīʿah and some have failed to see the value of Serjeant's work and have dismissed it as trivial *realia*.

Of the writings left after Serjeant's death there is both good and bad news. The translation and annotation of his favourite undergraduate text, which he taught for many years, the *Bukhalā'* of al-Jāḥiẓ, was complete but for an introduction and will be published in due course. Work on the collection of texts in manuscript by the Yemeni Rasulid monarch, al-Malik al-Aẓ̣am al-ʿAbbās (d. 1374), a facsimile edition of which Serjeant had successfully proposed to the E. J. W. Gibb Memorial Trust in collaboration with the American scholar, Dr Daniel Varisco, will continue and will also be published in due course.

Sadly, Serjeant's work over many years on the economic history of

the medieval Yemen, in particular that of the Rasulids (ca. 1228–1454), never saw the light of day. In the 1950s Serjeant discovered the uncatalogued manuscript in the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan of the *Mulakhkhaṣ al-fiṭan* of al-Ḥasan b. ʿAlī al-Sharīf al-Ḥusaynī, an incomplete codex with detailed information on the fiscal practices of the Rasulids in Aden. It was Professor S. D. Goitein, with whom Serjeant had discussed the *Mulakhkhaṣ*, who informed Professor Claude Cahen of Serjeant's interest in it. Cahen too had been working on the MS for some time and collaboration between the two began.[9] Much had been achieved, but both scholars are now dead and it may well be some time before the very few scholars who have worked on the original sources of the economic history of the medieval Yemen can assess precisely what should be done. Meanwhile, all the relevant papers (Cahen's as well as Serjeant's) are housed along with all Serjeant's papers, MSS and books, in the Muir Institute in the University of Edinburgh. It was Serjeant's wishes that they should be donated to, and preserved together in, the Institute and it has been possible to fulfil them both.

To those who knew Serjeant, it was his kindness, warmth and generosity which stood out above his other qualities and they were forthcoming to friends, colleagues and students alike, not to mention their families. His ideas and theories, as well as his personal possessions, even rare and valuable books and papers, would be dispensed willingly to all those who could make good use of them. It is true, approval of a person could often be slow in coming. But when it did come, it was strong and lasting. Loyalty he regarded as a two-way process and he expected loyalty in return. In this he was sometimes gravely disappointed. He was perhaps at his best at the annual international Seminar for Arabian Studies. It was not so much as a chairman or lecturer that he was highly prized, but during breaks for refreshments and in the evenings, he was in great demand. It was on such occasions that he gave liberally of his wisdom to all who sought it, professional scholar and interested amateur alike, with equal and unfailing courtesy. Not for him, it must be said, the bluster and pomposity of some academics; if he did not know something, he would say so. He and his wife were the epitome of Arab hospitality and their beautiful Linton

[9] See their joint article, 'A Fiscal survey of the medieval Yemen. Notes preparatory to a critical edition of the *Mulaḫḫaṣ al-fiṭan* of al-Ḥasan b. 'Alī al-Šarīf al-Ḥusaynī, *Arabica* 4 (1957) 23–33.

house and garden frequently became the venue of their banquets. Whole sheep might be roasted, by courtesy of the local baker who owned the only oven in the village large enough to cope. St Andrews in their retirement was a little out of the way, though they continued to entertain their guests there.

Serjeant possessed a strong, though subtle sense of humour and his wicked chuckle is sorely missed by those fortunate enough to have enjoyed it. It is perhaps illustrated best by mention of his uncanny facility for composing, often entirely extempore, English doggerel of the most amusing kind. This was often simply to embellish a conversation over a drink with friends; at other times these ditties might find their way into his publications and might serve as translations from Arabic poetry. My own dull and utterly prosaic, if perhaps slightly more literal, translation of some lines in Ibn al-Mujāwir's *Tārīkh al-Mustabṣir*,[10] rendered as follows[11]

> Were [one of their] old women to be cast into the depths of the sea,
> She would come ashore leading a whale.
> By her cunning she can lead along a thousand mules,
> Even if they are drawn by means of a spider's thread!

Serjeant's ingenuity allowed him to versify thus[12]

> An old hag who, if tossed to the sea floor,
> Leading a whale would [safely] come ashore.
> Mules a thousand she would through guile have led,
> Dragged along by a rope of spider thread.

Serjeant certainly had his pet hates. He had little time for armchair orientalists, those working in fields which required travel for their work, but who never did. He utterly despised meetings of university committees and high-table politics; they were time-wasting distractions from the real business of teaching and research. He turned down more than once the chairmanship of the Faculty of Oriental Studies in Cambridge and never held high administrative office. Meetings of a purely academic nature were of course a different matter and he was certainly a keen and active Trustee of the E. J. W. Gibb Memorial Trust, which was

[10] Edited by Oscar Löfgren (Leiden, 1951–4), 268, the Arabic reads

'Ajūzun law ramiyat fī qaʿri baḥrin atat li-al-barri qāʾidatan li-ḥūti
Taqūdu min al-siyāsati alfa baghlin idhā jurrū bi-khayṭi al-ʿankabūti.

[11] See my article 'Ibn al-Mujāwir on Dhofar and Socotra', *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 15 (1985), 86.

[12] See R. B. Serjeant, 'The Coastal Population of Socotra', in Brian Doe, *Socotra Island of Tranquillity* (London, 1992), 141.

brought into existence in 1901 '. . . to promote those researches into the History, Literature, Philosophy, and Religion of the Turks, Persians, and Arabs . . .',[13] and an enthusiastic member of the Steering Committee of the Seminar for Arabian Studies.

Doubtless because of his excellent colloquial Arabic and the great deal of time he spent travelling in the Arab world, Serjeant and his writings were popular among the Arabs. Lowly informants, scholars, intellectuals, ambassadors and cabinet ministers throughout the Arab world joined in spirit with his family, friends and colleagues to mourn his death. In the field of Yemeni, and indeed Arabian, studies there is no one to take his place.

Note. I have received a great deal of help in the writing of this memoir and must mention with gratitude some of those who have so willingly and speedily provided me with information and answered my questions. Firstly, I must express my thanks to Mrs Marion Serjeant, not only for all her help and kindnesses over the years, but also for her unfailing good humour and co-operation in our dealings in the aftermath of her husband's death. The late Dr Robin Bidwell, who had known Serjeant as well as anyone, provided me with much information. Professor C. F. Beckingham, whose own friendship with Serjeant goes back to the time of the War, has not only answered my questions from time to time with great patience, but has also read this memoir in draft and made useful comments and suggestions for its improvement. Last though by no means least, I mention with gratitude the kind assistance of Professors J. D. Latham and M. Yasir Suleiman of the University of Edinburgh.

[13] Quoted from the introductory pages of the Trust's publications.

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